



Chapter 20

Light Come, Light Go

Lady Muriel's smile of welcome could not quite conceal the look of surprise with which she regarded my new companions.

I presented them in due form. "This is Sylvie, Lady Muriel. And this is Bruno."

"Any surname?" she enquired, her eyes twinkling with fun.

"No," I said gravely. "No surname."

She laughed, evidently thinking I said it in fun; and stooped to kiss the children a salute to which Bruno submitted with reluctance: Sylvie returned it with interest.

While she and Arthur (who had arrived before me) supplied the children with tea and cake, I tried to engage the Earl in conversation: but he was restless and distraught, and we made little progress. At last, by a sudden question, he betrayed the cause of his disquiet.

"Would you let me look at those flowers you have in your hand?"

"Willingly!" I said, handing him the bouquet. Botany was, I knew, a favorite study of his: and these flowers were to me so entirely new and mysterious, that I was really curious to see what a botanist would say of them.

They did not diminish his disquiet. On the contrary, he became every moment more excited as he turned them over. "These are all from Central India!" he said, laying aside part of the bouquet. "They are rare, even there: and I have never seen them in any other part of the world. These two are Mexican—This one—" (He rose hastily, and carried it to the window, to examine it in a better light, the flush of excitement mounting to his very forehead) "—is. I am nearly sure—but I have a book of Indian Botany here—" He took a volume from the book-shelves, and turned the leaves with trembling fingers. "Yes! Compare it with this picture! It is the exact duplicate! This is the flower of the Upas-tree, which usually grows only in the depths of forests; and the flower fades so quickly after being plucked, that it is scarcely possible to keep its form or color even so far as the outskirts

CHAPTER 20 -- *LIGHT COME, LIGHT GO*

of the forest! Yet this is in full bloom! Where did you get these flowers?" he added with breathless eagerness.

I glanced at Sylvie, who, gravely and silently, laid her finger on her lips, then beckoned to Bruno to follow her, and ran out into the garden; and I found myself in the position of a defendant whose two most important witnesses have been suddenly taken away. "Let me give you the flowers!" I stammered out at last, quite 'at my wit's end' as to how to get out of the difficulty. "You know much more about them than I do!"

"I accept them most gratefully! But you have not yet told me—" the Earl was beginning, when we were interrupted, to my great relief, by the arrival of Eric Lindon.

To Arthur, however, the new-comer was, I saw clearly, anything but welcome. His face clouded over: he drew a little back from the circle, and took no further part in the conversation, which was wholly maintained, for some minutes, by Lady Muriel and her lively cousin, who were discussing some new music that had just arrived from London.

"Do just try this one!" he pleaded. "The music looks easy to sing at sight, and the song's quite appropriate to the occasion."

"Then I suppose it's

 'Five o'clock tea!
 Ever to thee
 Faithful I'll be,
 Five o'clock tea!'"

laughed Lady Muriel, as she sat down to the piano, and lightly struck a few random chords.

"Not quite: and yet it is a kind of 'ever to thee faithful I'll be!' It's a pair of hapless lovers: he crosses the briny deep: and she is left lamenting."

"That is indeed appropriate!" she replied mockingly, as he placed the song before her.

"And am I to do the lamenting? And who for, if you please?"

CHAPTER 20 -- LIGHT COME, LIGHT GO

She played the air once or twice through, first in quick, and finally in slow, time; and then gave us the whole song with as much graceful ease as if she had been familiar with it all her life:—

“He stept so lightly to the land,
All in his manly pride:
He kissed her cheek, he pressed her hand,
Yet still she glanced aside.
‘Too gay he seems,’ she darkly dreams,
‘Too gallant and too gay
To think of me—poor simple me—
When he is far away!’

‘I bring my Love this goodly pearl
Across the seas,’ he said:
‘A gem to deck the dearest girl
That ever sailor wed!’
She clasps it tight’ her eyes are bright:
Her throbbing heart would say
‘He thought of me—he thought of me—
When he was far away!’

The ship has sailed into the West:
Her ocean-bird is flown:
A dull dead pain is in her breast,
And she is weak and lone:
Yet there’s a smile upon her face,
A smile that seems to say
‘He’ll think of me he’ll think of me—
When he is far away!’

‘Though waters wide between us glide,
Our lives are warm and near:
No distance parts two faithful hearts
Two hearts that love so dear:
And I will trust my sailor-lad,
For ever and a day,
To think of me—to think of me—

CHAPTER 20 -- *LIGHT COME, LIGHT GO*

When he is far away!”

The look of displeasure, which had begun to come over Arthur’s face when the young Captain spoke of Love so lightly, faded away as the song proceeded, and he listened with evident delight. But his face darkened again when Eric demurely remarked “Don’t you think ‘my soldier-lad’ would have fitted the tune just as well!”

“Why, so it would!” Lady Muriel gaily retorted. “Soldiers, sailors, tinkers, tailors, what a lot of words would fit in! I think ‘my tinker-lad sounds best. Don’t you?”

To spare my friend further pain, I rose to go, just as the Earl was beginning to repeat his particularly embarrassing question about the flowers.

“You have not yet—”

“Yes, I’ve had some tea, thank you!” I hastily interrupted him. “And now we really must be going. Good evening, Lady Muriel!” And we made our adieux, and escaped, while the Earl was still absorbed in examining the mysterious bouquet.

Lady Muriel accompanied us to the door. “You couldn’t have given my father a more acceptable present!” she said, warmly. “He is so passionately fond of Botany. I’m afraid I know nothing of the theory of it, but I keep his Hortus Siccus in order. I must get some sheets of blotting-paper, and dry these new treasures for him before they fade.

“That won’t be no good at all!” said Bruno, who was waiting for us in the garden.

“Why won’t it?” said I. “You know I had to give the flowers, to stop questions?”

“Yes, it ca’n’t be helped,” said Sylvie: “but they will be sorry when they find them gone!”

“But how will they go?”

“Well, I don’t know how. But they will go. The nosegay was only a Phlizz, you know. Bruno made it up.”

These last words were in a whisper, as she evidently did not wish Arthur to hear. But of this there seemed to be little risk: he hardly seemed to notice the children, but paced on,

CHAPTER 20 -- *LIGHT COME, LIGHT GO*

silent and abstracted; and when, at the entrance to the wood, they bid us a hasty farewell and ran off, he seemed to wake out of a day-dream.

The bouquet vanished, as Sylvie had predicted; and when, a day or two afterwards, Arthur and I once more visited the Hall, we found the Earl and his daughter, with the old housekeeper, out in the garden, examining the fastenings of the drawing-room window.

"We are holding an Inquest," Lady Muriel said, advancing to meet us: "and we admit you, as Accessories before the Fact, to tell us all you know about those flowers."

"The Accessories before the Fact decline to answer any questions," I gravely replied. "And they reserve their defense."

"Well then, turn Queen's Evidence, please! The flowers have disappeared in the night," she went on, turning to Arthur, "and we are quite sure no one in the house has meddled with them. Somebody must have entered by the window—"

"But the fastenings have not been tampered with," said the Earl.

"It must have been while you were dining, my Lady," said the housekeeper.

"That was it, said the Earl. "The thief must have seen you bring the flowers," turning to me, "and have noticed that you did not take them away. And he must have known their great value—they are simply priceless!" he exclaimed, in sudden excitement.

"And you never told us how you got them!" said Lady Muriel.

"Some day," I stammered, "I may be free to tell you. Just now, would you excuse me?"

The Earl looked disappointed, but kindly said "Very well, we will ask no questions."

"But we consider you a very bad Queen's Evidence," Lady Muriel added playfully, as we entered the arbor. "We pronounce you to be an accomplice: and we sentence you to solitary confinement, and to be fed on bread and butter. Do you take sugar?"

"It is disquieting, certainly," she resumed, when all 'creature-comforts' had been duly supplied, "to find that the house has been entered by a thief in this out-of-the-way place.

CHAPTER 20 -- LIGHT COME, LIGHT GO



If only the flowers had been eatables, one might have suspected a thief of quite another shape—”

“You mean that universal explanation for all mysterious disappearances, ‘the cat did it’?” said Arthur.

“Yes,” she replied. “What a convenient thing it would be if all thieves had the same shape! It’s so confusing to have some of them quadrupeds and others bipeds!”

“It has occurred to me,” said Arthur, “as a curious problem in Teleology— the Science of Final Causes,” he added, in answer to an enquiring look from Lady Muriel.

“And a Final Cause is—?”

“Well, suppose we say—the last of a series of connected events—each of the series being the cause of the next—for whose sake the first event takes place.”

“But the last event is practically an effect of the first, isn’t it? And yet you call it a cause of it!”

CHAPTER 20 -- *LIGHT COME, LIGHT GO*

Arthur pondered a moment. "The words are rather confusing, I grant you," he said. "Will this do? The last event is an effect of the first: but the necessity for that event is a cause of the necessity for the first."

"That seems clear enough," said Lady Muriel. "Now let us have the problem."

"It's merely this. What object can we imagine in the arrangement by which each different size (roughly speaking) of living creatures has its special shape? For instance, the human race has one kind of shape—bipeds. Another set, ranging from the lion to the mouse, are quadrupeds. Go down a step or two further, and you come to insects with six legs—hexapods—a beautiful name, is it not? But beauty, in our sense of the word, seems to diminish as we go down: the creature becomes more—I won't say 'ugly' of any of God's creatures—more uncouth. And, when we take the microscope, and go a few steps lower still, we come upon animalculae, terribly uncouth, and with a terrible number of legs!"

"The other alternative," said the Earl, "would be a diminuendo series of repetitions of the same type. Never mind the monotony of it: let's see how it would work in other ways. Begin with the race of men, and the creatures they require: let us say horses, cattle, sheep, and dogs we don't exactly require frogs and spiders, do we, Muriel?"

Lady Muriel shuddered perceptibly: it was evidently a painful subject. "We can dispense with them," she said gravely.

"Well, then we'll have a second race of men, half-a-yard high—"

"—who would have one source of exquisite enjoyment, not possessed by ordinary men!" Arthur interrupted.

"What source?" said the Earl.

"Why, the grandeur of scenery! Surely the grandeur of a mountain, to me, depends on its size, relative to me? Double the height of the mountain, and of course it's twice as grand. Halve my height, and you produce the same effect."

"Happy, happy, happy Small!" Lady Muriel murmured rapturously. "None but the Short, none but the Short, none but the Short enjoy the Tall!"

CHAPTER 20 -- *LIGHT COME, LIGHT GO*

"But let me go on," said the Earl. "We'll have a third race of men, five inches high; a fourth race, an inch high—"

"They couldn't eat common beef and mutton, I'm sure!" Lady Muriel interrupted.

"True, my child, I was forgetting. Each set must have its own cattle and sheep."

"And its own vegetation," I added. "What could a cow, an inch high, do with grass that waved far above its head?"

"That is true. We must have a pasture within a pasture, so to speak. The common grass would serve our inch-high cows as a green forest of palms, while round the root of each tall stem would stretch a tiny carpet of microscopic grass. Yes, I think our scheme will work fairly well. And it would be very interesting, coming into contact with the races below us. What sweet little things the inch-high bull-dogs would be! I doubt if even Muriel would run away from one of them!"

"Don't you think we ought to have a crescendo series, as well?" said Lady Muriel. "Only fancy being a hundred yards high!"

One could use an elephant as a paper-weight, and a crocodile as a pair of scissors!"

"And would you have races of different sizes communicate with one another?" I enquired. "Would they make war on one another, for instance, or enter into treaties?"

"War we must exclude, I think. When you could crush a whole nation with one blow of your fist, you couldn't conduct war on equal terms. But anything, involving a collision of minds only, would be possible in our ideal world—for of course we must allow mental powers to all, irrespective of size. "Perhaps the fairest rule would be that, the smaller the race, the greater should be its intellectual development!"

"Do you mean to say," said Lady Muriel, "that these manikins of an inch high are to argue with me?"

"Surely, surely!" said the Earl. "An argument doesn't depend for its logical force on the size of the creature that utters it!"

CHAPTER 20 -- *LIGHT COME, LIGHT GO*

She tossed her head indignantly. "I would not argue with any man less than six inches high!" she cried. "I'd make him work!"

"What at?" said Arthur, listening to all this nonsense with an amused smile.

"Embroidery!" she readily replied. "What lovely embroidery they would do!"

"Yet, if they did it wrong," I said, "you couldn't argue the question. I don't know why: but I agree that it couldn't be done."

"The reason is," said Lady Muriel, "one couldn't sacrifice one's dignity so far."

"Of course one couldn't!" echoed Arthur. "Any more than one could argue with a potato. It would be altogether—excuse the ancient pun—*infra dig*!"

"I doubt it," said I. "Even a pun doesn't quite convince me."

"Well, if that is not the reason," said Lady Muriel, "what reason would you give?"

I tried hard to understand the meaning of this question: but the persistent humming of the bees confused me, and there was a drowsiness in the air that made every thought stop and go to sleep before it had got well thought out: so all I could say was "That must depend on the weight of the potato."

I felt the remark was not so sensible as I should have liked it to be. But Lady Muriel seemed to take it quite as a matter of course. "In that case—" she began, but suddenly started, and turned away to listen. "Don't you hear him?" she said. "He's crying. We must go to him, somehow."

And I said to myself "That's very strange."

I quite thought it was Lady Muriel talking to me. Why, it's Sylvie all the while!" And I made another great effort to say something that should have some meaning in it. "Is it about the potato?"